

**Remarks of EPA Regional Administrator Jane Kenny
Nosh and Knowledge Lecture
Jewish Community Center of Middlesex County
Edison, New Jersey
Tuesday, August 12, 2003**

Thank you for inviting me here – twice. The first time I was scheduled to speak with you we were snowed out by what I think was the biggest snowstorm of the winter.

That was almost exactly a half-year ago. A lot has happened since then. Our nation went to war. A new disease appeared, called SARS. The stock market gained several hundred points. Our state's drought ended. Lance Armstrong won another Tour de France. And we marked the passing of two American icons, Katherine Hepburn and Bob Hope.

Of course, another thing happened during these past six months. How many people in this room celebrated a birthday between mid-February and today?

Odds are, roughly half of us did. But every one of us, 100 percent, did something else. We got a little older.

Aging is a constant. Not that we should obsess about that fact. As Satchel Paige once said, age is mind over matter – if you don't mind, it doesn't matter. But it does matter in that it can make a difference in how we conduct our lives. Where we spend our time, where we live, how we get around.

The topic of aging is more and more part of the national conversation, with good reason: the first of our baby boomers are fast approaching their senior years. The first baby boomers will hit 65 in 2011.

Over time, the demographics will shift even more dramatically. Right now, people over 60 represent about 10 percent of the world's population. Children, by contrast, represent about 30 percent. By mid-century, both groups – seniors and kids – will represent about 21 percent.

So that's a major change, and as a society, we have to think about what that means for our country. There are already debates about Social Security and health care and related topics. But for us at EPA, aging also has an environmental dimension.

Every American wants clean air, clean water, clean land. We all want that. And no one wants to see pollution in our community. But we know that it can have a different effect on us as we age.

For immune systems to be weaker in those who have diseases associated with later years,

such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, this fact is probably not a surprise to anyone.

Nor would it surprise us to hear that people who carry a health condition into old age are weaker.

But even healthy older people have diminished capacity to detoxify and eliminate toxic chemicals. And, of course, there are some contaminants that build up in the body a little at a time, such as lead, mercury, and asbestos – and the longer we live, the more they accumulate.

The older we are, the more susceptible we become to environmental conditions. We tend to think of pollution from outdoor air, but a more troublesome source can be the air indoors. Poor indoor air quality can exacerbate respiratory or heart problems, or trigger asthma attacks. And, of course, that's especially rough on folks who spend all their time indoors.

We also know that older immune systems are less able to fight off waterborne microbes such as cryptosporidium and e-coli. And extreme temperatures are especially difficult – we saw that in the 1995 Chicago heat wave, which killed 500 people, most of them seniors.

There is a lot we know about how the environment affects people as they age. But there is a lot we don't know, and there is a lot more we could be doing to counteract these effects. For these reasons, EPA is developing what we call a "National Agenda on the Environment and Aging."

Let me tell you a little bit about this national agenda, and then I want to ask your help in fleshing it out.

Former EPA Administrator Christie Whitman – that's another change since February – laid out a framework for the Agenda on Aging. The framework has three elements.

First, we will identify critical gaps in the research. What don't we know about environmental health risks for older people? What are the factors we haven't considered? How can we use that research to find ways to prevent or reduce those risks?

Second, what effect will a growing older population have on our environment itself? What impact will we have as we make decisions about where to retire, or as more of us are using and disposing of medicines? How do planners need to anticipate seniors' needs and balance them with environmental protection?

The third element in this framework is much more personal. We want to encourage older Americans to volunteer their talent and expertise on environmental issues. We want to tap their abilities to help reduce environmental hazards and protect the environment for everyone.

We're asking, what volunteer programs are out there in communities already that could be replicated around the country? What can we do to give older people incentives to pursue this

kind of volunteerism?

EPA has held listening sessions in several cities across America over the past several months. We have heard testimony from people of many backgrounds and ages in the process. We have set September 30 as a deadline for people and organizations to give us their comments and suggestions. We will then shape those ideas and the framework into a National Agenda that gives us clear goals and objectives to pursue in the coming years.

Already, President Bush has provided funding in the federal budget for research on the first two items in the framework. And we are looking to work with groups like the Corporation for National and Community Service on the volunteer component.

On the topic of volunteering, one quick example. EPA recently worked with seniors and community leaders in Camden on an environmental health project. The goal was to help parents and their children avoid lead poisoning and reduce asthma triggers.

We needed to have the community workers invited and welcomed into the homes because this was a key location for the interventions. Usually, people are very reluctant to have strangers enter their homes.

But we found that because this project involved seniors, they were welcomed into the homes and were able to talk with the parents relatively easily. Many of the seniors had their own kids and grandchildren, so they knew how to give constructive advice.

That trust factor, along with life experience, is a reason that older citizens have a valuable role to play as volunteers on many fronts, including environmental.

Now that you have heard about this initiative, let me tell you what I hope we get out of it, then I want to hear from you.

I hope that our National Agenda on Aging results in a growing awareness of these issues not only in the halls of Congress but also in the halls of our senior centers. I hope we will have government support for the research, but I also hope we get the word out about common-sense ways to reduce environmental risks.

Ideas such as...

Using and storing pesticides and cleaning solvents in ways that reduce exposure...making sure air filters on air conditioners are cleaned and replaced...improving the way communities deal with heat waves and cold snaps. There is tremendous value in just publicizing the fact that we need to think about environmental factors differently as we age.

I support this initiative partly because it's my job, but mostly because of what it means to

me. I'm the daughter of a very healthy, very active senior citizen. I'm also the mother of two teenagers, and the grandmother of a couple of young ones. So I know the things we can do to improve the environment for my mother are also going to help my kids and grandchildren.

That's one thing we have noticed: seniors like this initiative not necessarily because what it means for them as much as what it might do to help their grandchildren. And that's just fine with me. We can all benefit from pursuing this agenda.

Now, here's where I'd like your help. You can formally respond to the EPA's request for comments at an address I can give you later (EPA Aging Initiative, Mail Code 1107A, 1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Room 2512, Ariel Rios North, Washington, DC 20460) or by e-mail at aging.info@epa.gov. You can also send comments to me and I'll forward them along.

But I would also like to hear your comments this morning. Do you think this agenda is a good thing for EPA to pursue? Do you think we need to expand on the framework I've laid out? Do you have thoughts about the particular kinds of research we ought to pursue?

I've come here to talk, and now I'm here to listen.

(After discussion)

I want to thank you for taking part in this discussion. I just want to leave you with a final thought.

I mentioned earlier that we lost Katherine Hepburn and Bob Hope. Hepburn was a brilliant actress who earned my everlasting admiration if for no other reason than that she made it OK for women to wear slacks. And Bob Hope, he did more for morale in the military than anyone in our nation's history. I think it was he who once said, "I'm so old, my blood type has been discontinued."

Hepburn was 96 and Hope was 100 when they died. They are a reminder that we in America are not just growing old, we're living longer. Thus it's that much more important that we make it a pleasant experience. Keeping the environment clean and healthy for ourselves and our loved one is certainly a great start in that direction.

Thank you.